

Message Text

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PDEV' PINT' UK
SUBJECT: CENTER STAGE AT DUNDEE -- THE SNP CONFERENCE

SUMMARY: THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY (SNP) WAS A WELL-ORCHESTRATED EVENT WHICH GAINED CONSIDERABLE MEDIA ATTENTION AND REINFORCED ITS MAJOR PARTY STATUS IN SCOTLAND. MUCH DISCUSSION WAS DEVOTED TO AGENDA ITEMS ON NUCLEAR POLICY, EDUCATION, TAX POLICY AND THE SNP DRAFT CONSTITUTION FOR AN INDEPENDENT SCOTLAND. THE CONFERENCE REJECTED A CALL FOR A REFERENDUM ON THE FUTURE OF THE MONARCH' BACKED PARTICIPATION IN DIRECT ELECTIONS TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND CALLED FOR AN EXCLUSIVE 50-MILE FISHING ZONE AROUND SCOTLAND. THE CONFERENCE CLOSED WITH AN OVERWHELMING ENDORSEMENT FOR THE PRESENT PARTY LEADERSHIP AND STRONG ATTACKS ON THE TORIES, THE GOVERNMENT AND THE SCOTTISH TUC ALIKE. END SUMMARY.

1. THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE SNP HELD IN DUNDEE ON MAY 26-28 SUCCESSFULLY MANAGED TO AVOID DIVISIVE ISSUES AND MADE THE MOST OF CONSIDERABLE MEDIA ATTENTION. THE
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RANKS OF THE DELEGATES HAD BEEN CONSIDERABLY ENLARGED OVER PREVIOUS YEARS AND SOME 2000 DELEGATES AND OBSERVERS WERE ON HAND FOR THE FINAL SESSION ON SATURDAY. THE CONFERENCE ATTRACTED CONSIDERABLE MEDIA COVERAGE, INCLUDING A FULL HOUR'S ANALYSIS ON BBC SCOTLAND. EIGHT OBSERVERS FROM THE DIPLOMATIC COMMUNITY ALSO COVERED ALL OR PART OF THE AGENDA.

2. THE CONFERENCE OPENED WITH A STRONG SPEECH BY SNP SENIOR VICE CHAIRMAN MARGO MACDONALD WHO CAPITALIZED ON THE FAILURE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S DEVOLUTION BILL. IN STRESSING THE CONFERENCE'S THEME OF "INDEPENDENCE--SCOTLAND'S FUTURE," SHE REJECTED TALK OF COMPROMISE IN NOTING THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE MIDDLE GROUND IN THE INDEPENDENCE-UNIONIST DEBATE. MP GORDON WILSON ATTACKED THE GOVERNMENT AND THE TORIES, THE FORMER AS "A PARTY OF THE PAST," AND THE LATTER AS "THE PARTY OF BLANK MINDS," THEMES WHICH WERE ECHOED THROUGHOUT THE CONFERENCE BY A MULTITUDE OF SPEAKERS.

3. THE CONFERENCE CAREFULLY FOLLOWED AN AGENDA OF 48 RESOLUTIONS WHICH HAD BEEN WORKED OVER BY THE NATIONAL COUNCIL, MEETING IN PRIVATE OVER THE SEVERAL MONTHS PRECEDING THE CONFERENCE. TRULY DIVISIVE ISSUES SUCH AS THE DESIRABILITY OF THE SOCIAL CONTRACT WERE AVOIDED. THERE WAS ALSO NO MENTION OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, SAVE THE DISCUSSION ON ELECTIONS TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT. CONSIDERABLE TIME WAS DEVOTED IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE CONFERENCE TO THE QUESTION OF STORING NUCLEAR WASTES IN SCOTLAND, AN ISSUE WHICH STIRRED NATION-AL COUNCILMAN WILLIE MCRAE TO NEW HEIGHTS OF ORATORY IN THE TRADITION OF WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN. WHILE THE CONFERENCE WAS ABLE TO EXPRESS ITS DISLIKE FOR THE STORAGE OF NUCLEAR WASTES, IT CHOSE TO DEFER CONSIDERATION OF THE LARGER QUESTION OF A NUCLEAR ENERGY POLICY.

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4. RESOLUTIONS ON EDUCATION AND TAX POLICY DOMINATED TWO OTHER SESSIONS. THE CONFERENCE REJECTED A CALL FOR MAKING ALL STATE SCHOOLS NON-DENOMINATIONAL, A PROPOSAL WHICH WAS JUDGED TO BE POLITICALLY UNWISE AS IT WOULD ALIENATE POSSIBLE SNP SUPPORT AMONG THE CATHOLIC POPULATION (THE STATE SUPPORTS BOTH SECULAR AND CHURCH -- PREDOMINANTLY ROMAN CATHOLIC -- SCHOOLS IN SCOTLAND). A RATHER NATIONALISTIC CALL FOR AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE DOMINANCE OF NON-SCOTS AMONG UNIVERSITY STAFFS WAS ADOPTED, AS WAS A RESOLUTION CALLING FOR THE BBC AND ITV TO REVIEW THEIR ATTITUDE TOWARD THE SCOTS IN THEIR PROGRAMMING FOR SCHOOL-AGE YOUNGSTERS. THE RESOLUTIONS ON TAX POLICY INCLUDED THE PROPOSAL FOR A MINIMUM-INCOME SCHEME TO REPLACE TAX ALLOWANCES AND A PROPOSAL TO SHIFT SOME OF THE BURDEN FROM PERSONAL INCOME TO EXPENDITURE TAXES.

5. THE DEBATE ON THE DRAFT CONSTITUTION FOR AN INDEPENDENT SCOTLAND PROVIDED SOME INTERESTING EXCHANGES ON

THE QUESTION OF THE MONARCHY. AN AMENDMENT HAD BEEN

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PROPOSED WHICH WOULD HAVE MADE THE QUEEN'S POSITION AS HEAD OF STATE IN SCOTLAND SUBJECT TO A PUBLIC REFERENDUM. OBVIOUSLY ANNOYED BY THE QUEEN'S UNIONIST SENTIMENTS IN HER RECENT WESTMINSTER HALL SPEECH, A LIMITED NUMBER OF DELEGATES URGED ADOPTION OF THE AMENDMENT. MONARCHISTS AND POLITICAL REALISTS JOINED FORCES TO DEFEAT THIS CHALLENGE TO THE MONARCH. ONE NOTABLE CHANGE TO THE PROPOSED CONSTITUTION WHICH EMERGED FROM THE CONFERENCE WAS THE INCLUSION OF AN "INITIATIVE REFERENDUM" PROCEDURE WHICH WOULD GIVE A "SIGNIFICANT NIFICANT MINORITY" OF ELECTORS THE RIGHT TO HAVE A REFERENDUM CALLED. A SIMPLE MAJORITY IN THE SUBSEQUENT REFERENDUM WOULD BE BINDING ON THE GOVERNMENT.

6. THE CONFERENCE DECIDED IN FAVOR OF CONTESTING DIRECT ELECTIONS TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, WITHOUT DIRECTLY ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF FUTURE COMMON MARKET TIES FOR AN INDEPENDENT SCOTLAND. DESPITE THE PROTESTS OF MP DONALD STEWART, WHO IDENTIFIED HIMSELF AS "A TOTALLY UNREPENTANT OPPONENT" OF THE EEC, THE CONFERENCE
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ENCE RECOGNIZED THE POLITICAL DESIRABILITY OF CON-
TESTING SUCH ELECTIONS. (THE SNP OPPOSED BRITISH
MEMBERSHIP IN THE EC DURING THE 1975 REFERENDUM CAM-
PAIGN.) IN ANOTHER EEC-RELATED MATTER, THE CONFERENCE
REJECTED THE COMMON MARKET FISHING POLICY AND CALLED
FOR AN EXCLUSIVE 50-MILE FISHING LIMIT FOR SCOTTISH
WATERS.

7. MINOR DIVISIONS THAT APPEARED DURING THE DEBATES
QUICKLY DISAPPEARED AT THE CLOSE OF THE CONFERENCE. THE
CURRENT LEADERSHIP OF THE PARTY WAS STRONGLY ENDORSED
BY THE DELEGATES. CHAIRMAN WILLIE WOLF WAS RE-
ELECTED WITHOUT OPPOSITION, AND MARGO MACDONALD WAS RE-
TURNED AS SENIOR VICE-CHAIRMAN BY AN OVERWHELMING
MAJORITY, FAR OUTDISTANCING HER MP RIVALS, MARGARET
BAIN AND DOUGLAS HENDERSON. STRONG ATTACKS ON THE
SCOTTISH TUC, THE GOVERNMENT AND THE TORIES MARKED THE
CLOSING SPEECH BY DOUGLAS HENDERSON, WHO PLAYED TO AN
AUDIENCE OF 2000-PLUS.

8. COMMENT: THE SUCCESSFUL SNP CONFERENCE IN DUNDEE
GIVES NEW EVIDENCE OF THE POLITICAL SOPHISTICATION AND
MATURITY OF THE PARTY. BY AVOIDING DIVISIVE ISSUES
AND BY HAMMERING AWAY AT THE GOVERNMENT AND THE TORIES,
THE PARTY CONTINUED TO DEMONSTRATE A SENSE OF MOMENTUM
WHICH IT HOPES WILL CARRY IT THROUGH TO SUCCESS IN THE
NEXT GENERAL ELECTION. WHILE MUCH LARGER QUESTIONS
ON PARTY POLICY WERE LEFT UNRESOLVED, THE CONFERENCE DID
CONVEY AN IMPRESSION OF A PARTY ON THE MOVE. COUPLED
WITH THE APPARENT INABILITY OF THE GOVERNMENT TO RE-
VIVE THE DEVOLUTION BILL AND HALT THE FURTHER DECLINE
IN THE ECONOMIC SITUATION IN SCOTLAND (THE LOSS OF 300
JOBS IN DUNDEE WAS HEADLINED DURING THE CONFERENCE),
THE SNP COULD VERY WELL MAINTAIN THE MOMENTUM AT THE
NEXT POLLING.

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